



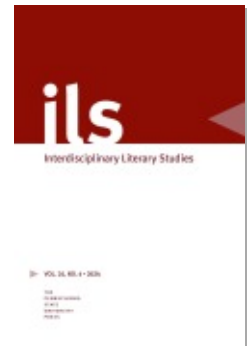
PROJECT MUSE®

Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing by Lee Edelman (review)

Holly Eva Allen

Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, Volume 26, Number 4, 2024, pp. 627-629 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/948094>

BOOK REVIEW

- ▶ A Review of *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*. Lee Edelman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. pp. 368 ISBN 978-1-4780-1862-9.

HOLLY EVA ALLEN

<https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.26.4.0627>

A prospective reader of Lee Edelman's most recent book, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*, might assume that the text will spend the bulk of its pages breaking down the work of celebrated queer theorists in detail, from Judith Butler to Guy Hocquenghem. While Butler and Hocquenghem are referenced, the amount of space Edelman's book spends with them and similar queer theorists is comparatively small. Based on the title, another prospective reader might hope for a book that discusses andragogy with regard to queer theory. In truth, this second individual would be largely disappointed by Edelman's book, as it is far more abstract and philosophical than it is actionable for those working in higher education. However, while the book may not be what readers unfamiliar with Edelman's work might expect, it is an intensely fascinating exploration of identity, society, and Lacanian theory.

Thankfully, Edelman clears up the premise at the omphalos of his work for the reader in the first few pages of the premise, noting of the word *queer*: "Even where its fluidity of reference, its resistance to taxonomic specificity, allows it to serve as a general rubric for nonnormative sexualities, *queer* so relentlessly challenges the boundaries of sexuality and normativity that no one can ever definitively succeed in escaping its connotative reach" (xv). While the aforementioned fluidity and connotative reach of queerness as an abstract concept might prompt some to assume that everything is automatically queer, Edelman directly tells us that "no," that is not the case, before clarifying that "[i]nsofar as queerness pertains to ab-sens, it argues that nothing 'is' queer, while maintaining that *nothing*, the ontological negation

figured by queerness, is. . . . *Bad Education* theorizes queerness without positivizing ‘queers.’ . . . [I]t maximizes certain issues while minimizing others” (43).

Although Edelman’s approach to queerness does not lend itself easily to individuals exploring queerness as a helpful identifier, it does allow for a thorough investigation of how ab-sens presents itself or, rather, presents nothing, and how society constructs itself and associated understandings only on the outskirts of such absence. Much of this entire construction relies on a thorough and rather groundbreaking application of Lacanian thought, as the use of ab-sens might imply. While psychoanalysis and adjacent methodologies have been largely struck down by feminist and queer theory scholars thanks to sagacious thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Edelman’s specific employment of Lacan is not phallogocentric or redundant and might, instead, be called nothing-centric in its focus on the liminal aspects of psychoanalysis.

This investigation is perhaps at its best when it makes use of Afropessimism and adjacent theories to add nuance to the discussion of the individual versus the group in processes of identification. Edelman includes the work of thinkers such as Jared Sexton since “[m]ajor thinkers of Afropessimism theorize Blackness in similar terms” and question how identifiers can be apart from that which aims to define them and associated aesthetics if one of these identifiers and those they are self-applied to are not “willing its own social death” (171–72). While these identifiers create community, they create a community in identification with an abstraction that marks itself by the identity that it is not. As Edelman writes, the aesthetic form and presumed application to an individual or community being and way of being “can offer no image of queerness, or Blackness, or sex, though later, under certain regimes of visibility, their catachrestic positivizations might appear” (172). These sections of the book are so engaging that their only shortcoming is that they are too few. Edelman’s discussion of nothingness and identification in the *something* realm of societal denotation genuinely opens up a plethora of applications, leaving space for scholars hoping to explore the *nothing* inherent in additional identifiers.

Edelman’s text makes use of not only Afropessimist thinking and Lacanian philosophy, but it also explores a number of films. In fact, the deconstruction of ratio and framing applied to Pedro Almodóvar’s titular film *Bad Education* in chapter 1 is insightful and extensive to the point that any academic looking to write on recent queer films would be remiss to overlook it. Similarly, the discussion of fourth wall breaks and “the

illusion of the camera's nonpresence" in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* in chapter 3 would undoubtedly be of use to those investigating the liminal space between actor, director, camera, and viewer. So, although Edelman's text might not immediately strike prospective readers as especially applicable to those applying philosophical concepts to film studies and popular culture, a good portion of the book proves otherwise.

This last point intimates the primary question at hand: Who exactly is this book for? Considering the probable confusion some readers might feel given the title, as outlined at the opening of this review, it is a valid question without an immediately apparent answer. Thinkers looking for new applications of psychoanalysis, specifically Lacanian thought, would likely find this text to be of use. Certainly, those interested in the perception of queerness as a construction throughout time would be in error to overlook it, along with Edelman's previous work, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In mentioning Edelman's earlier book, however, I am faced with a realization that prompts me to make a somewhat cautionary statement. While Lacanian thinkers, film studies scholars, and academics investigating understandings of queerness will all benefit from reading *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*, ultimately this text is one that is not overeager to lay its insights down intelligibly and simply without a significant foundation. Put differently, Edelman's most recent book is filled with complex, valuable thought, but thought that is inarguably most accessible to those familiar with Lacan, much of standardized queer theory, and Edelman's previous work, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

HOLLY EVA ALLEN is a PhD scholar and instructor of record in English with the University of Rhode Island. Her original articles and book reviews have appeared in a variety of peer-reviewed journals, including *Women's Studies*, *The Journal of American Culture*, and *The Journal of Popular Culture*.